

[How Mr. Queen Became "King"]

No. 2.

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Life History 1A Duplicate

TITLE: HOW MR. QUEEN BECAME "KING" OF THE BARBER BUSINESS

Date of First Writing January 20, 1938

Name of Person Interviewed John R. Queen (white)

Street Address 126 N. Walker Street

Place Spartanburg, S.C.

Occupation Barber and Beauty Supplies

Office Address 112 Magnolia Street

Name of Writer Elmer Turnage P.1- "J R Queen Jr.

A glass case, the dimensions of which are about four feet high and two feet square, stands inconspicuously at the edge of the sidewalk, in a narrow passage between two buildings on Magnolia Street. It contains two or three song books (hymnals), a hair brush, a Japanese comb, several bottles of hair tonic, a variety of razors, and a few other articles such as are found in a barber shop. Painted in bold lettering on the front of the glass case are the words "J.R. Queen — Beauty and Barber Supplies — Upstairs."

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An old iron stairway in the alley leads to the second floor of one of the buildings. The padlock on the outside of the door is unfastened, but the door is securely fastened on the inside. A sheet of tin, which has been substituted for the broken glass in the door, rattles and reverberates in the narrow opening between the buildings as a self-styled C10 - 1/31/41 - S.C. 2 preacher raps loudly for admittance. He shifts his weight alternately from one foot to the other as he impatiently waits in the cold, brisk morning air.

"Just a minute, " calls the soft, typically southern-toned, bass voice of Mr. Queen.

The lock clicks and the heavy door on the landing of the stairs opens with a scream. The smiling, 6-foot and bespectacled Mr. Queen, his 200 pounds radiating with unusual vitality for his 66 years, receives his visitor with a "Good morning, Brother. Come right in to the fire."

The little room through which Mr. Queen led his visitor, Mr. Smith, was filled with supplies which well represented every phase of the beauty and barber business. Boxes of creams and lotions were stacked along the walls; and sun lamps, electric clippers, and new and used barber chairs so filled the room that one of them the [?] had to trail behind the other in going to the office room.

"Here, take a chair and rest yourself," said Mr. Queen in his monotone voice. What can I do for you this morning?"

A glowing fire in the open grate lent the only semblance of a homey atmosphere in the little office. On one wall hung a variety of combs, brushes, razors, and other small articles which represented in part the supplies sold by Mr. Queen to the barber trade. A large draftman's table — incongruously adapted for the use made of it — was piled high with beauty aids of various description — hair tonics, massage creams, depilatories, etc. Some of these concoctions were made from Mr. Queen's own formulas and manufactured for him in New York. A few other tables, each equally disarrayed, added to the jumbled

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appearance of the room, but the sparkling reminiscences of Mr. Queen were more than sufficient to draw attention from surrounding conditions.

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"Don't guess you smoke," Mr. Queen said laconically as he lit a cheap brand cigarette.

"I'm not so particular about the kind I use, but I smoke lots of them — light one off another sometimes."

He got up and started rummaging through a stack of books and papers that lay in confusion on a table in the corner of the room.

"Now let me see, let me see — you want one of the new song books. It's here some place, I'll find it in a minute. Ah, there they go all over the floor!

"'Sparkling Songs,' Here it is — a brand new book, put out by The A.L. Showalter Company of Dalton, Ga. You will notice, Mr. Smith, that this book was copyrighted this year."

While thumbing through the pages Mr. Queen hums the tune of the song he is looking for; then suddenly he says:

"Oh yes, number seven; the name is Since Jesus is Living in Me. No, no, that is not the only song I've written. I have songs in seven different song books."

Mr. Queen adjusted his spectacles and ran his fingers through his thin hair; then clearing his throat, he said, "Now listen, Brother. Here's the way this thing goes — dooo, sol , faaa, me dooo."

After a while he forsook the old-time symbols for a guttural [guttaeral?] hum to indicate the tune, occasionally supplying words where they belonged.

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"Mr. Smith, I'm glad you folks over there like our songs; nine out of every ten churches do, whether they use them or not. The only one in town that fights us is that little jack-leg Baptist preacher over there on Green Street, and because he doesn't like them, he's always trying to say something to hurt the books. The reason that church don't use my books is because they don't know how to sing the songs.

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"Oh yes, I've been fooling with music all my life. It's just a sort of hobby with me. I used to play cornet and several other instruments, but all I do now in the music line is to sing — just a minute, somebody's at the door."

Mr. Queen's heavy voice rose above the loud rattle of the tin on the door. "Come on in, the door's unlocked." copy from here

A moment later — after stumbling over some obstruction in the other room — a young man peered in at the door.

"I just wanted to get some more of that massage cream," he said; "it's the best I ever used." A moment later the young fellow left the place shortly, with a 16-ounce jar of the pink-colored cream . and [it?] had cost him only 50 cents.

"Now that's some of my own make," Mr. Queen said proudly. "You see what it says on the label — J.R. Queen, Spartanburg, S.C. I have it made in New York, for they can make it lots cheaper than I can because they make so much of it at a time. It's my own formula though; made from pure cow's milk, just before it clabbers. Of course it has a little oxalic acid and a few other things in it."

Mr. Queen picked up another jar of the cream and reached over and took his visitor by the hand.

"You think your hand is clean, don't you? Well, just let me show you something. I'll rub a little of this massage cream into the pores — now you see, it brings the dirt right out. Oh no, your hand wasn't really dirty — it was just as clean as you can get it with soap and water; but the cream brings stuff out of the pores that water can't reach. That jar really cost me 47 cents, but I sell so much of it that I can afford to let it go almost at cost. In fact, I used to have a large crew of girls who did nothing but sell my cosmetics.

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"Now, getting back to the singing business — I've been messing with it regularly for thirty years. In the spring of 1909 Judge Burnett and I decided to form an association from the old-time singing custom, where people in the old days used to get together and have all-day singings. We met at Cunningham's school house, about 12 miles from here, with a group of people and formed what we called 'The Spartanburg County Singing Association.' Soon afterwards, people from more distant parts became interested and we had to form another association. We met every Sunday, usually in a school house, but sometimes we would use the courthouse when it was available.

"*1 There are [now? *1] forty associations in upper South Carolina and part of North Carolina. Each association group has a president, vice-president, secretary, and treasurer. I am the I'm president of four different associations. We don't have an organized membership; anyone who wants to can come, and everybody has a right to vote in the election of the officers. A freewill offering takes care of all miscellaneous expenses, and no one receives any compensation for his services, other than the pleasure he gets out of attending. Attendance varies from 40 to 150, according to the number of people in the community. Some of the smaller counties have only one association, but there are several in this county.

"Five or six singing associations meet periodically and have a rally, or convention, and every year we have a state convention, when all 40 associations come together.

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"Each association meets every Sunday morning at 10:30. Sometimes two or three use the same meeting place, each alternately taking the lead. A piano or other instruments, when available, are used in the meetings, but the chief activity is group-singing. Sometimes we have quartet-singing, 6 especially on every fifth Sunday, when the convention meets for an all-day singing. Often 30 to 40 quartets take part in these special meetings. Usually there are several hundred people present. The meeting is opened with prayer, followed by several short talks. Each person brings his own basket, and members of the community in which the meeting is held take charge of the dinner, spreading it on long tables from which all eat together.

"The state convention meets every August, usually at Clemson College. Greenville, but there's also a big district convention at Clemson College. Besides the singing and talks, business matters are taken up at the state convention. Music publishers are there to display their hymnals; that's how I got into writing songs and selling books. The attendance at the big convention runs around 2,000.

"The first book used by the singing associations was the old Christian Harmony, written by the noted William Walker of this county. Two different books each year are used. They are collections of about 150 old-time songs and 50 new ones. The publisher selects and compiles the songs; then submits them to the presidents of the various associations before having the book published. The books now used are — Sweet Heaven, and Priceless Pearls. At the request of the presidents of the other associations, I collaborate with the publisher in getting out all the new hymnals. I also purchase the books and sell them to the members of the different associations. The wholesale price of the books runs about 18 cents per copy, and the retail price is 35 cents, but no profit is made, for many of them are given to members who are unable to pay for them. Local music writers often contribute compositions to the hymnals — an example is Mr. Sam Bishop of Saxon mills, who has contributed several of his own compositions." 7 Insert

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Mr. Queen was born October 2, 1875 in Burk county, N.C. He came of a family of four boys and four girls, three of the girls being half-sisters to him. His family was considered "big farmers" in the section from which he came. His father died at the age of 47, and his mother at 74.

On the large farm where Mr. Queen spent his early years, everything was raised, and all that had to be bought was "a little snuff, sugar, coffee, and the like." The country was richly adapted to the growth of tobacco, and several acres of land were always planted in this commodity. And in the words of Mr. Queen # — "We also raised rice, which looked very much like oats when it was still in the raw form ." , " he explained. "The husks were removed in what he termed a " ' beatler, " " which was made from the stump of a tree which had been sawed off about four feet from the ground. The stump was hollowed out to hold make a receptacle for the unbeaten rice. A stick, made in much the same something like fashion as a base-ball bat, was used to beat the rice. It took about an hour to beat out two pounds. " About 4,000 bushels of corn and 6,000 bushels of wheat were raised every year on the farm. Thirty-five to forty small hogs were killed each year to furnish meat for the family and the hired hands. "

The first school attended by Mr. Queen was a small one-room log cabin. He said that it was so well ventilated that "you could throw a dog through some of the cracks." His first teacher was Walter Fearis, from Charleston, who boarded with the Queen family. His salary was \$20 a month. Mr. Queen's father was a superintendant superintendent of the school. Money on which to run the school was appropriated by the county. It was [only*2] open *2 about three months a year, these usually being the winter months. " The hundred or so " ' scholars " ' who went to school were divided into several different classes . , " Mr. Queen continued. " Reading, spelling, geography, and mathmetics mathmetics were the main subjects taught in this country school. The one-room, log 8 building contained a series of long benches, the front one being used by the reciting class. When After each class was questioned on its lessons it would move to the bench at the back of the room,

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and the next class would move forward to recite. Some of the first books used at this school were — the blue-back speller, Winston's reader, and Webster's dictionary. “

Mr. Queen was 11 years old when the family moved to the little town of Glen Alpin, N.C. Here he attended the Glen Alpin academy. Tuition was \$1.50 a month. Mr. Queen He said that his teacher, R.L. Patton, was the finest man he ever saw. The instructor Mr. Patton told his class of 36 students that when he was a small boy he was once severely whipped by his father, and that later in the day when he was sent to get some wood, he ran away from home. After roaming about awhile he went to Philadelphia, where he worked his way through school. The philosophy of this old teacher was always a guiding light for Mr. Queen. He said of him:

“I shall never forget how the old man looked when he told us the story. He said, 'Now boys, don't think that just because you are poor you can't get to the top of the ladder; and I hope to see all of you there some day.' And every one of his 36 students did get to the top of the ladder in one way or another. Mr. R.E. Simpson of the Southern railway was one of those boys; Ed. [?], senator from North Carolina, was another; and one of them was the great Baptist missionary, Tom Blalock. I got to the top of the ladder in the barber business, too. I started with a one-chair shop in 1901 and in 1918 I owned the biggest single barber shop in the world — a thirty-chair shop, all in one room.”

Mr. Queen began his career as a barber while he was still in school, at the age of fourteen. He soon went to Nashville, Tennessee, where he studied barbering under J.L. Jones, a national nationally known teacher. He graduated from the barber college when he was 16 years old. Up to this time he had 9 made little money, only about enough to defray his expenses. He came home and stayed for a year; then went to Chicago, where he took further training in the barber business. He has also served in the [U.S.?] Army. In [recalling?] some of his experiences in the United States army, Mr. Queen said:

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“When I was 19 years old I went to Columbus, Ohio , and signed up with the 4th Infantry. From there I was sent to Fort Spokane, Washington. During my first two years in the army service I received private's pay of \$13 a month, but, according to regulations, was raised to \$14 the third year. Of course, this did not represent all that I made while I was in the army, for the government allowed me \$12 extra each month for teaching school, and with what I made barbering, the whole amount was something like \$150 a month. My official duty was drum major, but I also did other things. For awhile I clerked in the commissary department, and at another time I worked in the adjutant's office. One time when the colonel was away, the adjutant took his place and I took the place of the adjutant; that was only for about ten days, though.

“The army has changed in a lot of ways since I was a soldier. At that time New York had as many militia as the national government had regulars. There were only 9 divisions in the United States. These represented 25 regiments of infantry, 10 of cavalry, and [5?] light artillery. A regiment consisted of 12 companies, and had as officers — a colonel, lieutenant-colonel, major, 12 captains, 12 first and 12 second lieutenants, and so on, down to the sergeants and corporals.

“One of my most interesting experiences while in the army was a hunting and fishing trip I took with some of the boys. We left Fort Spokane and went 65 miles up the Columbia river, crossed over and made our camp on the Canadian side. We stayed up there in the wilderness for ten days. Besides 10 myself, the group consisted of Dr. Culp, Chas. Bulb (captain's son), Private Davis, Mr. Gardner (an old hunter and trapper), and Thomas Edison. Mr. Edison joined us after we set up our camp; he was an intimate friend of Dr. Culp. I remember that he had several of his inventions with him. He had a little static machine — I wasn't familiar with the mechanism — and when he turned the crank the sparks would fly in every direction. I ask him what he thought electricity was, and he replied: “ Electricity is just electricity, that's all I know. “ He also had a talking machine which had attached to it about a dozen listening tubes. We sat around camp at night with

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those tubes in our ears and listened to the music. One piece that Edison liked to play was The Sidewalks of New York. Another thing he had with him was a machine into which we could look and see pictures in motion; it also was operated by turning a hand crank. I believe it was the earliest type of motion picture machines.

“None of us got more enjoyment out of our outing than did Mr. Edison. We all slept together, and when one turned over, all had to turn. Like each of the others, Edison took his turn watching at night for coyotes and other wild animals. I still have a picture which was taken of Edison him as he sat in front of our tent.

“I was discharged from the army at Fort Sheridan, Ill., in 1897. During my three years service I saved \$2,700, and it was this money that gave me a start in the business world.”

After leaving the army Mr. Queen went to Nashville Tenn., where he joined the city police force and remained for seven or eight months. He received \$60 a month for his services. From Nashville he went to Chicago and rented a beauty and barber establishment; he employed several men and ten girls, all of whom worked on the commission basis. He did no actual barber 11 work himself; but he was engaged in other activities. In reply to questions concerning the nature of his "work on the side," Mr. Queen said:

“I did special work for the post office department and also for private detective agencies, but I don't want to give out any information about that ; for they want things like that to be kept under cover.”

For several years Mr. Queen did this special work, besides that of carrying on his barber business. During his ten months in Chicago he made “a good deal” of money, but his expenses were dear and he saved only about \$800. For about two years after leaving Chicago, Mr. Queen he resided in North Carolina, the most of the time being spent in Caroleen, where he ran two shops. During this period he cleared about \$4,000, and he invested most of his savings in barber equipment.

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In 1901 Mr. Queen went to Clifton, S.C. , and set up a small one-chair barber shop — he also kept those in North Carolina. His reason for going to Clifton was to get situated in the midst of a manufacturing district, where he had visions of building up a big trade among the mill employees. At that time Clifton was a thriving cotton mill town, and it proved to be an admirable location for Mr. Queen's business. He soon had three shops in operation — a monopoly on the barber business in that section. He made it a policy from the very beginning to employ all the help he needed and to devote most of his time to the building up of his business. Among the his other activities in which Mr. Queen was engaged at Clifton, was the establishing of a weekly newspaper. He also placed various types of vending machines in all the store buildings. By June 1903 he was clearing about \$300 a month; then came the Pocollet River flood and destroyed all his equipment. This misfortune did not discourage him, however ; for he is not of a temperament to worry about conditions which cannot be helped.

With the five or six thousand dollars Mr. Queen had saved, he opened 12 up business in Spartanburg, S.C. in 1903. The 3-chair shop which he opened operated on Magnolia Street represented only a part of his business. Beginning on a small scale, he set up a barber supply house. He joined barber associations; went to their conventions; visited manufacturers of barber supplies, and learned “everything there is to know about the barber business.” In referring to what was the most important phase of his business, Mr. Queen said:

“As soon as I came to Spartanburg I started a school for barbers and beauticians. It was the first school of its kind in the South; Atlanta established one the next year. My school was in continuous operation for about 25 years. During that time I taught 5,464 men and women the barber and beauty trade. My students are to be found in every state in the Union — almost every town —, and in five foreign countries. The thing that I'm the most proud of, is that not one of them has ever failed on an examination. During the World

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war I was one of the two who passed the government government test for the teaching of barbers. While Camp Wadsworth was located here I taught 137 soldiers the barber trade.”

The 3-chair shop which Mr. Queen opened in 1903 was enlarged to a 6-chair shop within six months. In 1904 he opened up four additional shops. He followed the policy of opening several small shops; then closing some of them to made a few larger ones. Mr. Queen's barber business netted him a profit of about \$100 a month for the first year in Spartanburg. Up to 1917 the increase in business and earnings was gradual. Net earnings and profits were of course derived from several sources. The barber shops were rented but the equipment belonged to Mr. Queen. He employed barbers to work on a commission basis; he hired agents to sell cosmetics and barber supplies, and some of the larger equipment, such as barber chairs, he rented. Besides this he made a fair profit from the tuition of his students in the barber college.

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The monthly profit-earnings of \$100 in 1903 gradually rose to more than \$1,000. During the World War business reached an abnormally high level. In 1918 Mr. Queen converted his barber college into a 30-chair shop, thus making what he says was the largest barber shop in the world. The largest day's business was \$982.20 clear profit. One barber earned for his day's work \$156.20.

“Let me see if I can find some of my records,” said Mr. Queen, “and I'll show you about how the business runs now.”

It was revealed from his records that Mr. Queen controls 31 barber shops in and around Spartanburg. He also has several in North Carolina. He estimated that he took in about \$1,000 a day. He said that his rating in Bradstreet and Dunn is \$75,000.

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Mr. Queen has been married for many years but they have no children. Besides the interest he has in old-time singings, his chief hobby is hunting and fishing. At one time he was a member of 13 different lodges and secret orders.

"I've got to go hunting," he said, reaching for his hat. "There's one thing you might tell them — I've never been drunk, and have never been put in jail."